WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. Food holding apparatus for holding pre-cooked food at a selected holding temperature, said apparatus comprising:

a cabinet having at least one holding compartment therein;

pre-cooked food in the holding compartment, said food having been previously cooked in a cooking appliance;

at least one radiant heat source spaced above the food a distance less than 12 inches for delivering radiant heat to the food; and

a control mechanism for varying the amount of radiant heat delivered by the heat source to the food to maintain the food at said selected holding temperature.

2. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said distance is less than 10 in.

3. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said distance is less than 8 in.

4. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said distance is less than 6 in.

5 Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said distance is less than 4 in.

6. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said distance is less than 2 in.

7. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said distance is in the range of 0.25-10 in.

8. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said distance is in the range of 0.25-8 in.

9. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said distance is in the range of 0.25-6 in.

10. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said distance is in the range of 0.25-4 in.

11. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 werein said distance is in the range of 0.25-2 in.

12. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 further comprising partitions in the cabinet dividing the cabinet into a plurality of separate, thermally isolated holding compartments, at least one tray in each of said holding compartments holding pre-cooked food therein, at least one radiant heat source spaced above the pre-cooked food in said tray a distance less than 12 inches for delivering radiant heat to the food, and said control mechanism being adapted for controlling operation of the heat sources independent of one another whereby the temperature in each compartment may be independently controlled.

13. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said control mechanism is operable to vary the radiant heat delivered by said at least one heat source to the food through a duration of holding time, said duration comprising a first phase at which radiant heat is delivered to the food by the heat source at a first level to permit said pre-cooked food to cool down to said selected holding temperature, and a second phase at which radiant heat is delivered to the food by

the heat source at a second level higher than said first level to hold the food at said selected holding temperature.

14. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 13 wherein said duration of holding time further comprises a third phase at which radiant heat is delivered to the food at a third level less than said second level to maintain said pre-cooked food at said holding temperature.

15. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said control mechanism comprises at least one sensor in the compartment for detecting a characteristic indicative of the temperature of the pre-cooked food in the compartment, the control mechanism being responsive to signals from said sensor to vary the amount of radiant heat delivered by the heat source to the food to maintain the food at said selected holding temperature.

16. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 15 wherein said sensor is a temperature sensor for detecting the temperature of a surface in the compartment.

17. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 15 wherein said sensor is operable to detect radiant energy emitted by said pre-cooked food.

18. Food warming apparatus as set forth in claim 1 wherein said control mechanism is programmed to operate said heating source according to a predetermined protocol to vary said radiant energy delivered to said food depending on the type of pre-cooked food placed in the compartment.

19. A method of preserving cooked food, comprising the steps of:

cooking food in a cooking appliance to provide pre-cooked food;

placing the pre-cooked food in a holding compartment of food warming apparatus for a duration of holding time; and heating the pre-cooked food in the holding compartment for at least a portion of said duration of holding time by delivering radiant heat to the food;

said heating step comprising varying the amount of radiant heat delivered to the pre-cooked food to maintain the food at a selected holding temperature.

20. A method as set forth in claim 19 wherein said pre-cooked food placed in the compartment is at a temperature greater than ambient temperature, and said heating step comprises not delivering any substantial radiant heat to the pre-cooked food until the food has cooled to a temperature approaching said selected holding temperature.

21. A method as set forth in claim 19 wherein said pre-cooked food placed in the compartment is at a temperature below ambient temperature, and said heating step comprises delivering radiant heat to the pre-cooked food until the food reaches said selected holding temperature.

22. A method as set forth in claim 19 further comprising sensing a characteristic indicative of the temperature of the pre-cooked food in the compartment, and varying the amount of radiant heat delivered to the food according to said sensed characteristic.

23. A method as set forth in claim 22 wherein said sensed characteristic is a temperature of a surface in said holding compartment.

24. A method as set forth in claim 22 wherein said sensed characteristic is an amount of radiant energy emitted by said pre-cooked food.

25. A method as set forth in claim 19 further comprising placing said pre-cooked food in said holding oven at a location within a distance of less then 12 in. from a source of overhead radiant heat.

26. A method as set forth in claim 19 further comprising placing said pre-cooked food in said holding oven at a location within a distance of less then 10 in. from a source of overhead radiant heat.

27. A method as set forth in claim 19 further comprising placing said pre-cooked food in said holding oven at a location within a distance of less then 8 in. from a source of overhead radiant heat.

28. A method as set forth in claim 19 further comprising placing said pre-cooked food in said holding oven at a location within a distance of less then 6 in. from a source of overhead radiant heat.

29. A method as set forth in claim 19 further comprising placing said pre-cooked food in said holding oven at a location within a distance of less then 4 in. from a source of overhead radiant heat.

30. A method as set forth in claim 19 further comprising placing said pre-cooked food in said holding oven at a location within a distance of less then 2 in. from a source of overhead radiant heat.

31. A method as set forth in claim 19 wherein said amount of radiant heat is varied by activating and deactivating a source of radiant heat.

32. A method as set forth in claim 19 wherein said amount of radiant heat is varied by increasing and decreasing the level of radiant heat delivered by a source of radiant heat without deactivating the heat source.